

Transcript of teachings by Khen Rinpoche Geshe Chonyi

Lesson No: 1

Date: 19th June 2012

Studying and understanding the subjects that are taught in the Basic Program are the foundation for you to gain an unmistakable understanding of the Great Treatises that you may have an opportunity to study in the future. When you are able to gain an unmistakable understanding of these Great Treatises, you can share your understanding of those teachings with others. In this way, you will be able to benefit many people.

Due to your unmistakable understanding of those great Buddhist teachings, you will also benefit on an individual level because you will be able to use those teachings to bring about a change in your own mind, especially when you have developed the conviction in and gained an ascertainment of the validity of those teachings.

As Buddhists, we always make prayers for the teachings of the Buddha to flourish but it is insufficient to make prayers alone. We have to understand that we as individuals also have a responsibility to cause the teachings of the Buddha flourish.

What does this mean – to cause the teachings of the Buddha to flourish? It means that we have to cause both the scriptural teachings and the realisational teachings to flourish.

How can we cause the scriptural teachings to flourish? On an individual level, having learnt and gained an unmistakable understanding of the teachings of the Buddha, we share our knowledge with others. This is how one causes the scriptural teachings of the Buddha to flourish.

In a similar way, as an individual, on the basis of having gained an unmistakable understanding of the teachings of the Buddha, we put those teachings into practice and effect some positive change in our heart and mind. That is what is meant by causing the realisational teachings of the Buddha to flourish.

Just as we continue to pray for the teachings of the Buddha to flourish, we should also put those prayers into action by learning those teachings through listening, studying, and analysing them to gain an understanding of them. Therefore, it is very important to make the constant effort in learning and reflecting on the teachings.

As I have often mentioned before, we all accept that we accumulate merit when we recite OM MANI PADME HUM. We also accept that we accumulate

merit when we circumambulate holy objects. By applying logic and reasoning, we conclude that when we engage in these activities, we will create merit.

Likewise when we study the teachings of the Buddha, we will also create merit. Simply reading the teachings of the Buddha is in itself a virtuous activity. It brings about the accumulation of merit. On the basis of learning and gaining an understanding of the teachings of the Buddha, the merit we accumulate will be even greater.

We have to remember this all the time. We should think, “Every time I read and study the text, I am creating virtue and accumulating merit.” By keeping this in mind, you should strive to come to class. Of course all of you have busy lives. But since all of us have obtained this human life and now have the opportunity to learn about the teachings of the Buddha, we should seize this opportunity to do so.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama always says that we all have to be 21st century Buddhists. What does he mean by that? He says that it is insufficient to just have faith and belief in the teachings of the Buddha. Rather we should study and actually discover for ourselves what the Buddha taught. The kind of faith that we should develop is the faith that arises from understanding what the Buddha taught. This is very important.

The teachings of the Buddha are such that when you put effort into studying them, you will be able to understand them. From studying the Buddha’s teachings, you will be able to discover for yourself that they are truly special and are in a class of their own. They are very different from other instructions or teachings you can find in this world. But this discovery can only come about when you actually study the teachings yourself. Once you see that, you will have an understanding of how the Buddha is so special and unique. With this comes a very strong faith in the Buddha. Once you have found such faith in the Buddha, gaining the positive experiences of the path and the realisations will be easy.

Another thing to note is that during the course of your studies, it is possible that you may feel there is not much use in studying because you do not see the purpose and benefits of doing so. You may have such thoughts. You may not see the point in learning some of the topics that are taught.

At that time, you have to remember what I mentioned earlier: the purpose of learning the subjects in the Basic Program is to enable you to be able to learn and understand the profound treatises in the future. So keep this goal in mind. Whenever there is something you do not understand such as new terminologies and so forth, simply tell yourself that this is

something you must learn and memorise as this will become the tools for and foundation of studying those advanced subjects in the future.

Khen Rinpoche: It is not easy to learn the terms in these philosophy texts. I will share with you my own experience.

From the time I was twelve years old to the time I was eighteen, I studied these basics, what is going to be covered in the class today. I was studying them for six years, but I had no idea of what these basic points were referring to throughout those 6 years! Maybe it was because I was young and I was not paying attention. I had no idea. I didn't know anything. I had zero knowledge. I knew the words but I didn't know their meaning.

After that I moved to Sera at the age of eighteen. For the first three to six months, when I went to class, I had no idea what they were talking about. I went to class to receive teachings but, again, I didn't understand a single word of that the teachers said. This is my story.

Even though I spoke Tibetan, the Dharma terms and how the texts were written were completely different from spoken Tibetan. It was very difficult to understand the meaning of the words. It took me a very long time to get into the philosophical subjects.

Only after one year in Sera, only after that did I have some slight interest in philosophy because I understood some words and learnt how to debate a little. From then on I had more interest in studying more deeply into the subjects.

But in the very beginning I had no interest at all because I didn't understand a single thing. I went through that for six to seven years (at Kopan). I didn't understand even the very basic topics. But somehow after one year (in Sera) I had some interest to do more. Once you have the interest, that will push you to continue further. That was how I completed my studies. Starting with some small interest on my part, it pushed me through eighteen, nineteen years to the completion of my studies.

There is no age limit with regard to studying philosophy. But studying it when you are young is much better because your mind is sharper. You can think better. As you get older you cannot think so much. That is a fact.

I will tell you my mother's story. Many people know this story already. My mother could not read or write as she had never been to school. Until the age of 70, she didn't know how to read or write. But at the age of 70, she developed some interest in studying Tibetan and learning how to read.

How did she have this interest? It was because she went to do Nyung Na with the lay people. Everyone else could read and chant the prayers. She felt so discouraged because she was the only one who was unable to do

that. She was very unhappy. Everyone was of the same age and she wanted to be able to do what they could do. She was inspired by that.

So she went to study how to read the Tibetan language so that she could read the text and chant the prayers. That was her wish. She did two to three years of Tibetan classes. Every morning she would walk one hour to class, study for two hours and then walk one hour to come home. She told me when she went to class, she would know how to read but when she came home, she would have forgotten everything. She didn't know how to read. Sometimes she felt discouraged and stressed.

A few years ago she showed me the Tibetan text. She could read the text. She read it out to me. It was not perfect but it was ok. She could read a bit here and there. After that she was quite happy.

My auntie was exactly like my mother and didn't know how to read or write either. My mother became her teacher and became quite proud. Sometimes she would even shout at my auntie! She did manage to achieve her goal. She could do some prayers and she was happy with that. .

So when you put in the effort, I think everyone can learn something. When you really wish to learn and you have the interest to do so, I think you can make it, according to your level of intelligence. Not everyone can be the same. That is not possible. Everyone have different levels of intelligence, different backgrounds, different interests, different effort, different amount of time, and so forth. Everyone cannot be the same. But the point is that when you have the interest and you have some enthusiasm, you can make something out of this. Think about the reasons I have mentioned for why we are studying the Basic Program. Keep them in mind. So let's start our journey.

With regard to the exam, 110 people sat for the exam. That is very good and very encouraging. You must know that whether you did well or badly, that doesn't matter. If you got a good mark, wonderful, and rejoice in that. If you didn't do so well, also rejoice and encourage yourself to do better the next time round.

*We will keep a record of the marks because in order to get the Final Certificate at the end of the five years, you must complete **all** the exams held before that. So those of who want to take the Final Exam, you must take all the exams before that. Keep this in mind. If you don't want to take the Final Exam, that is your choice. You don't want the certificate. You don't want the degree. You don't want enlightenment. That's ok. (Laughter) I am joking.*

This is why we conduct the exam. It is in accordance with the rule set by the FPMT. We need to follow that. So whether you did well or not, it is all right because this is a learning process. We can discuss the questions further to gain a better understanding of them. If we got the wrong answer, we have to question why we got it wrong and to find out what is the correct answer. From there you can learn more and share with each other. There will be a discussion on the exam questions this Sunday from 1.30 to 3.30pm.

Before we can start with the actual subject matter, you have to grasp some philosophical concepts and their terminologies because they will come up all the time in your study of Buddhist philosophy. It is crucial for you to understand these concepts as the words used in the terminologies will be new to most of you. You have no choice. You have to memorise all these terms and understand these concepts.

Established base

Established base is mutually inclusive with:

- an object of knowledge
- an existent
- an object of comprehension

Mutually inclusive means that although they have different names, they are referring to the same thing and have the same meaning. Established base, object of knowledge, existent and object of comprehension all refer to a phenomenon that is established by a valid cogniser.

Existent and non-existent

What is the difference between an existent and a non-existent?

- An **existent** exists because it can be realised by a valid cogniser (or a valid mind). Whatever exists is realised (or verified) to be existing by a valid cogniser.
- A **non-existent** is a phenomenon that does not exist because it cannot be verified by any valid cogniser. Its existence is not realised by a valid cognition. Therefore it does not exist. It is non-existent.

Impermanent phenomenon and permanent phenomenon

Established base can be divided into:

- impermanent phenomenon
- permanent phenomenon

If a phenomenon is an existent, it is either an impermanent phenomenon or a permanent phenomenon. For an existent, if it is not an impermanent phenomenon, it is *necessarily* a permanent phenomenon. These two possibilities are exhaustive. There isn't a third possibility whereby there is a phenomenon that is an existent that is neither impermanent nor permanent.

An **impermanent phenomenon** is mutually inclusive with:

- functioning thing
- product
- ultimate truth
- specifically characterised phenomenon
- composed phenomenon.

What is an impermanent phenomenon? It is called an impermanent phenomenon because it undergoes momentary change, i.e., it undergoes change in each and every single moment.

- An impermanent phenomenon can also be referred to as a **product**. It is called a product because it is a created or produced phenomenon.
- An **ultimate truth** is a phenomenon that is ultimately able to perform a function.
- What is a **specifically characterised phenomenon**? It is a phenomenon that is established by way of its own character without being imputed by term or thought consciousness, i.e., it is not imputed through conceptuality.
- An impermanent phenomenon can be known as a **composed phenomenon** because that phenomenon comes about or is composed through causes and conditions.

What we have mentioned so far is based on the view of the **Sutra School**.

You have to understand that these different terms are various ways of referring to impermanent phenomenon. They are not separate from impermanent phenomenon but are simply different ways of saying the same thing. Impermanent phenomenon, functioning thing, product, ultimate truth, specifically characterised phenomenon and composed phenomenon are **mutually inclusive**.

What is a **permanent phenomenon**? It is a permanent phenomenon because it does not undergo momentary change. Permanent phenomenon covers every single phenomenon that is not impermanent.

Question from Khen Rinpoche: If it is not an impermanent phenomenon, is it necessarily a permanent phenomenon?

Khen Rinpoche: For those who answered, “yes,” here is another question for you.

Question from Khen Rinpoche: Is a sky-flower a permanent phenomenon?

The point is this: Just because it is not an impermanent phenomenon, it does *not* necessarily mean that it is a permanent phenomenon. However,

if you were to say that it is an existent and it is not an impermanent phenomenon, then that means it is necessarily a permanent phenomenon.

A permanent phenomenon is mutually inclusive with:

- non-produced phenomenon
- conventional truth
- generally characterised phenomenon
- uncomposed phenomenon

A permanent phenomenon does not undergo momentary change.

- A permanent phenomenon can also be known as a **non-produced phenomenon**. A non-produced phenomenon is a non-created phenomenon.
- A **conventional truth** refers to a phenomenon that is ultimately unable to perform a function
- A **generally characterised phenomenon** is a phenomenon that is merely imputed by term or thought consciousness and it is not established as a specifically characterised phenomenon.
- An **uncomposed phenomenon** is a phenomenon that does not come into existence through the gathering of causes and conditions.

Let us review what we have covered so far:

<p>Established Base (mutually inclusive with object of knowledge, existent, and object of comprehension)</p>	<p><i>Impermanent phenomenon</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functioning thing • Product • Ultimate truth • Specifically characterised phenomenon • Composed phenomenon
	<p><i>Permanent phenomenon</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-produced phenomenon • Conventional truth • Generally characterised phenomenon • Uncomposed phenomenon

An established base refers to any phenomenon that exists. To help us better understand and clarify what an existent covers, there is the division of established base/existent into two: (1) impermanent phenomenon and (2) permanent phenomenon.

Likewise, to help us gain an even better understanding of what impermanent phenomena entail, there are also many divisions.

Divisions of impermanent phenomenon

An impermanent phenomenon refers to a phenomenon that undergoes

momentary change. It can be divided into:

1. Matter
2. Consciousness
3. Non-associated compositional factor

If it is an impermanent phenomenon, it is necessarily one of these three: matter, consciousness, or non-associated compositional factor.

Matter

- According to the Sutra School, form and matter are mutually inclusive.
- Matter is atomically established, i.e., it is established through the gathering of many atoms.

Consciousness

- Consciousness is an impermanent phenomenon but it is not matter.
- Consciousness is non-obstructive, i.e., it does not have colour and shape
- It is able to have a clear apprehension of objects appearing to it.
- Consciousness, awareness, and knower are mutually inclusive.

Non-associated compositional factor

When an impermanent phenomenon is neither matter nor consciousness, then it is necessarily a non-associated compositional factor.

What we have discussed so far is a presentation of what reality is. In technical Buddhist language, it is called **the basis**.

Matter and consciousness are different entities. Matter is atomically established and is composed of many particles or atoms. On the other hand, consciousness is non-obstructive with neither colour nor shape. It is like a void and has the factors of clarity and knowing.

We are now examining what reality is, the basis. At the level of the basis, matter and consciousness are radically different entities because of how they come into existence.

How is matter or form established? It comes into existence by depending on a concordant cause, i.e., a cause of a similar type. It is established by a former moment of matter or form. In the same way, consciousness is established in dependence on its concordant cause.

- Whether it is matter or consciousness, both are impermanent phenomena. Therefore they are products. The fact that they are products means that they are produced.
- Matter and consciousness are also composed phenomena because they are composed of causes and conditions.

Therefore, according to the Buddhist view, if it is an impermanent phenomenon, it cannot exist without depending on causes and conditions. If it is an impermanent phenomenon, it has to come into being by depending on causes and conditions. Not only that, it has to depend on a concordant cause or a cause of a similar type.

Therefore, whether it is matter or consciousness, they have to be established through causes and conditions.

With regard to the word, cause, there are two types of causes: (1) the substantial cause and (2) the cooperative condition.

Matter or form *cannot* act as the substantial cause of consciousness. Likewise, consciousness *cannot* act as the substantial cause of matter. This is because, in reality as we know it at the level of the basis, matter and consciousness are established as distinct or different entities. Therefore, they must come about from their respective causes.

Matter has to come into existence in dependence on former moments of matter. Likewise, consciousness has to come into existence from previous moments of consciousness. Based on this line of reasoning with regard to the substantial cause of consciousness, this is how we establish reincarnation and how we establish that there are past lives and there will be future lives.

Based on our observation of reality, that matter and consciousness are different entities that come about through their own substantial causes, on the basis of that understanding, we can then conclude that there is reincarnation, that there are past lives and that there will be future lives. From this you can see how an understanding of reality is so important. Based on your understanding of what constitutes reality, you can then think about some of these issues such as reincarnation.

In the case of consciousness, it has to come into being in dependence on some factor other than itself, i.e., it has to come about as the result of a cause. It cannot come about in dependence on a discordant cause. It has to come about in dependence on a concordant cause. From this, you can establish reincarnation, past, and future lives.

But even before you can begin to ascertain this for yourself, you must first have a good understanding of the basis, of reality, starting with the individual entities of matter and consciousness: how their distinct entities exist in reality. An ascertainment of how liberation exists, how the Buddha exists, and how enlightenment exists can only be arrived at based on the fundamental understanding of what constitutes reality, the basis.

As I have mentioned earlier, there is no other way of going about this other than by learning these terms. In preparation for the study of future subjects, you have to memorise and understand these terms. You must think big here and understand what the goal is. The goal is what you want to achieve in the future.

This is the preparation to help you to understand the teachings of the Buddha in the future. Please keep this in mind. On the basis of making these preparations now, when you gain some understanding of the teachings of the Buddha in the future, you will also gain mental satisfaction and happiness. Only then can you say that you have made this human life of freedoms and endowments meaningful.

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